

Race and librarianship: part II*

We have recently celebrated the anniversaries of milestones in US civil rights history—the *Brown v Board of Education* decision of 1954, the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960, the 1963 admission of black students to the University of Alabama, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights, and the subsequent Voting Rights Act in 1965. The civil rights movement had a profound impact on librarianship, as it did on the whole of US society. Individuals and organizations played roles in moving libraries and library associations toward racial equality, but it took the federal government to outlaw segregation.

Incendiary package: impact of the library press

The *Library Journal* and its editor Eric Moon launched a strike against segregation in Southern libraries in 1960. The December 15 issue contained an “incendiary package” [1], consisting of a condemnation of library segregation and the American Library Association (ALA), an excerpt from Richard Wright’s autobiographical *Black Boy* about his attempt to borrow library books, and an editorial by Moon [2–4].

Moon said “[i]t is common knowledge in the library profession that segregation is not something that happens only in schools and lunch-counters; that it happens in libraries too.” Rice Estes, whose status as a white Southern librarian gave him credence in the atmosphere of the day, described the denial of access to publicly owned books to ten million African Americans. He and Moon advocated a number of potential actions to counter segregation, including withholding federal Library Services Act funds from libraries whose

services were not available to all [2, 4].

The *Wilson Library Bulletin* had scooped Moon by three months with an editorial on the topic, claiming that ALA was as effective against segregation as its structure permitted and that it should not intervene in local situations [5]. Estes and Moon strongly challenged this assumption.

We would agree that ALA’s attitude toward segregation is clear. We do not agree that it is positive enough, nor that it is voiced either frequently enough or at the most appropriate times. And we are not convinced that an attitude is enough to offer ... Most urgent, in our opinion, is the need for the profession to find some way to give legal as well as moral support to librarians—and if need be, groups of citizens—who at present fight alone to keep libraries open and free. [4]

According to Moon’s biographer, “American librarianship was changed irrevocably by the explosive words in [this] issue of *Library Journal*” [1]. Although Moon was mistaken in his claim that *Library Literature* had no entries on the segregation issue (he apparently missed the heading “segregation and the library” [6]), he played an important role in increasing awareness and initiating a debate about segregation in US libraries and librarianship.

Pressure from the American Library Association

Librarians looked to ALA for leadership on the issue. In 1954, ALA had banned states from having more than one chapter to eliminate separate white and African American chapters, causing two states to lose ALA affiliation. In 1961, it adopted an addition to the Library Bill of Rights: “The rights of an individual to the use of a library should not be denied or abridged because of his race, religion, nation-

al origins or political views.” However, it refused to go further in regulating the affairs of chapters or the operation of libraries.

As a membership organization with no regulatory powers, the Association has expressed its stand on freedom of access to libraries. It can make its influence felt in many ways, but it has no authority to act in individual situations “to safeguard the rights of library users.” [7]

ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee presented a recommendation in 1961 requiring ALA to determine if state chapters were in compliance with association policies and to expel libraries that practiced discrimination. After a year of controversy, a milder revision of the recommendation was adopted as the *Statement on Individual Membership, Chapter Status, and Institutional Membership*, urging institutional library members to end discrimination as “speedily as possible” and requiring state chapters to certify compliance with ALA policies on member rights within three years [8, 9]. Louisiana and Mississippi chose expulsion from ALA rather than integrate their associations, joining Alabama and Georgia, which had earlier withdrawn as ALA chapters [1].

The 1964 ALA conference occurred the week the Civil Rights Act was signed. E. J. Josey, a prominent African American librarian, got a resolution passed by members that ALA officers and staff should refrain from attending meetings of state associations unable to meet chapter status requirements. Moon hailed Josey and Ruth Walling, a white librarian who supported the motion, in the *Library Journal* as “two stars from Georgia” [10, 11].

Struggle at the state level

Excellent accounts of the integration of the Louisiana Library As-

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sociation and the Alabama Library Association illuminate the struggle at the state level. Although the organizations had no formal prohibitions against African American members, they remained segregated until the mid-1960s.

[T]he greatest impulse to change came not from within the association [or by pressure from ALA but as] a by-product of the Civil Rights Act ... and the sweeping prohibitions it made on segregated public facilities and services. [12]

The Louisiana Library Association had made earlier halting attempts to integrate the association. In 1946, the executive board authorized President-elect Sue Hefley to use her discretion in pursuing the initiative of opening membership to African Americans. From 1949 to 1951, the Committee on Negro Participation (with no black members) worked toward holding meetings in locations where anyone could attend. William D. Postell Sr., librarian, Louisiana State University School of Medicine, participated as a committee member and later as association president. The association got few positive responses from universities and colleges about hosting integrated meetings, but it determined that state laws and city ordinances did not seem to prohibit such gatherings. However, the committee's recommendations were never put to a vote by the full membership for fear of a negative result [12].

During the same period, the Alabama Library Association also considered opening its membership, but it followed a different path than Louisiana. Once again, one individual led the effort, President Gretchen Schenk. However, the process was more public, involving the membership and African American librarians in Alabama. In 1950, a mail ballot on the question of "opening membership in the Alabama Library Association to Negro librarians" resulted in a low return, but 57% were in favor. A committee was appointed to study the advisability and feasibility of holding biracial meetings,

and African American librarians attended the 1951 convention. Nine of them paid their dues and joined the association. These actions resulted in acrimony, and eventually the association refunded the dues to the African American librarians and discharged the Biracial Committee [13].

In 1951, the library associations of Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi reported no formal barriers to membership but reported that most African Americans chose not to join. Florida, North Carolina, and South Carolina had separate white and African American associations. Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia had limited African American membership. Only Texas among the Southern states had a significant number of African American members, although it was low in relation to the size of the membership [12].

The professional ethics of some Southern librarians were overpowered by mores and customs. Because of fear or indifference, ALA's actions were ineffective in motivating Southern chapters to change. Only federal action had an impact on desegregation and social attitude [12, 14, 15].

Because no actual institutional change had taken place within the [Louisiana Library Association], there was little sense of accomplishment when the association finally certified its open status in 1965. The occasion of stepping from the ranks of "segregated" to those of "integrated" was marked with a sigh rather than a cheer. [12]

The Medical Library Association and affirmative action

The Medical Library Association (MLA) had integrated at the national level in 1939/40. However, its official response to the civil rights movement came well after equality was established by law. The Committee on Recruitment recommended to the Board of Directors at the 1972 annual meeting that MLA and its members should "assume a leadership role in the

elimination of racial prejudice and the provision of opportunity for seeking careers in library services for minority groups" [16].

MLA's *Plan of Affirmative Action*, adopted by the Board of Directors later in 1972, urged individual and institutional members to hire and advance qualified minority employees and to implement affirmative action plans. MLA also pledged to increase its own efforts toward affirmative action. Proposed actions affected areas such as hiring in the central office, recruitment into library schools and medical librarianship, continuing education courses, MLA officers and committee members, and asking institutional member applicants if their institutions had affirmative action plans [17]. To support the recruitment effort, scholarships began to be offered to minority library school students in 1973 [18].

Fifty-five years ago, Hefley spoke of the professional issues at stake in the effort to open the membership of the Louisiana Library Association to all races.

[N]o group within a profession has the right to exclude any other fully qualified group from full membership and participation in its recognized agency. When within a profession one group fails to utilize resources in vision, talent, and capability represented by another, the profession has been done a disservice. The progress of a profession is largely conditioned upon the degree to which it is truly representative of the whole profession. [12]

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